

"Coming out of the Darkness..."

**Presented at Village Power 98
Scaling Up Electricity Access for Sustainable Rural Development
Washington, D.C., October 6-8, 1998**

Mieko Nishimizu

I want to share with you this morning how my colleagues in the South Asia Region and I think about the centrality of "Village Power" to our mission -- poverty alleviation.

Ask any village woman you meet in South Asia, what she wants most of all.

"I want to come out of the darkness, and learn to read and write," she will say.

From Pakistan to Bangladesh, Sri Lanka to Nepal, Bhutan to India, from village to village, all over the subcontinent, their language may be different, but their dreams are the same.

In South Asia, people say:

"Educate a boy, one only educates a human being, Educate a girl, one educates generations to come." I mean no offence to you gentlemen, but am sure you understand me well. Girls' education, and women's literacy, is central to poverty alleviation, sustainable social and economic development, and nation building.

So, I walked the grass roots, listened to village sisters, and thought I understood them.

I thought "coming out of the darkness" meant out of their illiterate mental darkness.

How wrong I was...

In May this year, just before the nuclear tests of India and Pakistan, I spent 2 days and nights in a highland village of Azad Jammu Kashmir, Pakistan. There I met a widow, and she told me about her daily life.

"I get up before the sun, and fetch the water and fuel wood...
One hour going up and one hour coming down the mountain.
Start fire, make bread and tea for the children.
Feed my cow and goats.
Clean the animal shed, sweep the house.
I may eat, if anything is left.
Go out to the field, before the sun gets too hot.
I grow wheat and vegetables. No, I don't grow enough to sell.

Give children some tea, sometimes only warm water.
Go back to the field again.
I may do some wash.

Go fetch the water and wood again before the sun goes down.
Takes longer in the afternoon. It is hot and I am tired.
Start fire again, and make supper -- some bread and lentils.
Sometimes, only tea to drink.
More housework.

I talk with my children before sleeping -- I like this time best."

Then and only then I realized what "coming out of the darkness" really meant.

Imagine living your life like that -- day in, day out, 365 days per year, every year, for the rest of your life.

She taught me that "coming out of the darkness, to learn read and to write" means:

- to break out of such sub-human drudgery,
- to have that little precious time for their personal growth as a mother and human being, and
- to come out of the mental darkness.

She has access to an adult literacy program. But, 24 hours a day is barely enough just to survive.

In 1996, a Rural Household Energy Survey studied 5,048 households across India. Can you guess how much time a literate Indian village woman spends in reading? 8 minutes and 24 seconds per day!

West Bengal is a state known for its literary tradition, but low rural electricity access.

- An average West Bengali village woman reads 3 minutes and 36 seconds per day.

Punjab is a state with less literary accomplishments, but better rural electricity access. An average Punjabi woman spends more than 17 minutes reading each day...

South Asia's village women need desperately to save time, to gain literacy,

- to look after their own health, and of their children,
- to help their children learn,
- to participate in income generating activities, and
- to escape the poverty trap.

To come out of the darkness, of poverty of mind and of means, they need access to village power, to save that precious time.

And when they do, social and development impact of women's empowerment extends well beyond just one woman, to her family, to her community, and for generations to come.

That, is how my colleagues and I think about the strategic centrality of "Village Power" to our mission -- to alleviate poverty in South Asia.

South Asia has a total population of about 1.3 billion people, the majority in rural areas: (Bhutan - 94%; Nepal- 89%; Bangladesh - 81%; Sri Lanka - 78%; Maldives - 73%; India - 74%; and Pakistan - 65%)

About half, or 700 million, of South Asia's population have no access to electricity.

So, of 2 billion who lack access to energy worldwide, more than a third live in South Asia.

At least 350 million women in rural South Asia need electricity to free them from the bondage of traditional fuel transportation and water portage, smoky cooking, the dangers of lightless nights, and most of all, to gain the literacy they want so badly.

Yet, in many parts of the region, electricity distribution cables run through, over, and around villages, but the people lack access to this power.

Governments in the Region have invested tremendous amounts of resources in electricity generation, transmission, and distribution. But, these Utilities and the clientele they serve are:

- bankrupt and insolvent;
- inefficient and ineffective;
- corrupt, steal the electricity, or unwilling to pay for it; and
- benefit from subsidies intended for the poor and rural population.

Yes, we do get angry whenever we see these conditions, and become even more passionate in our power sector work for poverty alleviation. Country Assistance Strategies for all countries which are active borrowers in the region have clear and sector-wide strategies for addressing power and poverty alleviation.

We believe in a comprehensive approach that includes both radical power sector reform, and also Village Power and partnership with other agencies and entities, which can provide leadership and sustained support.

I do look forward, very much, to the fruits of this gathering of experts, to help us fight poverty in our region.

Thank you.